

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTUA #0101 0231418
ZNY CCCCC ZZH ZUI RUEWMC8040 0231419
P 231418Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHINGTON DC 0000
INFO MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000101

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG - HOPKINS, HARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: BEN ALI TAKES THREE DAYS "REST" ON DOCTOR'S ORDERS

REF: A. TUNIS 67

[1](#)B. TUNIS 28
[1](#)C. 05 TUNIS 2265

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (U) ON JANUARY 23, THE TUNISIA AFRICA PRESS AGENCY (TAP) ANNOUNCED THAT PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI IS TAKING THREE DAYS REST ON THE ADVICE OF HIS DOCTOR. THE TAP OFFICIAL STATEMENT FOLLOWS (INFORMAL EMBASSY TRANSLATION).

BEGIN TEXT:

THE OFFICIAL SPOKESMAN FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC ANNOUNCED THAT PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI IS TAKING THREE DAYS REST FROM MONDAY, JANUARY 22 UNTIL WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24 ACCORDING TO ADVICE FROM HIS PERSONAL PHYSICIAN. THIS IS DUE TO AN ACUTE INFECTION IN THE THROAT.

END TEXT.

[1](#)2. (C) THE TEXT OF THIS STATEMENT IS ALMOST IDENTICAL TO AN OCTOBER 2005 STATEMENT ANNOUNCING BEN ALI'S NEED FOR FOUR DAYS REST (REF C). THIS MOST RECENT "REST" WAS ANNOUNCED BY OFFICIAL SPOKESMAN, MINISTER OF STATE AND SPECIAL ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT ABDELAZIZ BEN DHIA. BEN DHIA, WIDELY CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL INDIVIDUALS IN TUNISIA, IS AMONG NAMES OFTEN MENTIONED AS POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS TO BEN ALI. WHILE BEN ALI'S 2005 "REST" WAS FOLLOWED A TIMELY RETURN TO NORMAL DUTIES, HIS ILLNESS ON THE HEELS OF THE RECENT SECURITY INCIDENTS (REF A) WILL LIKELY AGAIN STIR CONCERNS ABOUT HIS HEALTH AND POLITICAL CONTROL. BEN ALI'S HEALTH HAS BEEN OF CONCERN FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS (REF B AND PREVIOUS), INCLUDING CREDIBLE REPORTS THAT HE SUFFERED FROM PROSTATE CANCER, DEPRESSION, ARTHRITIS AND/OR A VARIETY OF OTHER AILMENTS.

[1](#)3. (C) AMBASSADOR LAST SAW PRESIDENT BEN ALI ON JANUARY 18 WHEN PRESENTING HIS CREDENTIALS. BEN ALI, WHO APPEARED SOMEWHAT TIRED OR PERHAPS BORED, STOOD THROUGHOUT THE BRIEF CEREMONY, WHICH LASTED APPROXIMATELY 20 MINUTES. AMBASSADOR IS SCHEDULED TO SEE BEN ALI AGAIN ON JANUARY 25, WHEN THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS IS SCHEDULED TO PRESENT THEIR NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS TO THE PRESIDENT.

[1](#)4. (C) COMMENT: IT IS POSSIBLE THAT BEN ALI'S ILLNESS IS CONVENIENTLY TIMED TO ALLOW HIM TO SKIP THE ARAB MINI-SUMMIT BEING CONVENED IN LIBYA ON JANUARY 23, OR TO COVER UP HIS UNWILLINGNESS TO ATTEND. BEN ALI RARELY UNDERTAKES OFFICIAL VISITS ABROAD (LAST VISITING MALTA IN JUNE 2005) OR EVEN OUTSIDE OF GREATER TUNIS (LAST TRAVELING TO THE NORTHERN CITY OF BIZERTE IN OCTOBER 2006). END COMMENT.

[1](#)5. (SBU) NOTE: ON JANUARY 10, THE CONSULAR SECTION ISSUED US VISAS FOR BEN ALI, HIS WIFE LEILA BEN ALI AND THEIR TWO

CHILDREN, HALIMA AND MOHAMED. IT APPEARED THAT THIS WAS SIMPLY A STANDARD VISA RENEWAL AS ALL FOUR HAD NEW TUNISIAN DIPLOMATIC PASSPORTS AND NEW BRITISH AND CANADIAN VISAS. INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM USDHS ON JANUARY 23 INDICATES BEN ALI HAS NOT ENTERED THE UNITED STATES. END NOTE.

¶6. (SBU) BIO NOTE: DURING AMBASSADOR'S JANUARY 18 PRESENTATION OF CREDENTIALS, PRESIDENT BEN ALI GREETED AMBASSADOR AND DCM IN ENGLISH AND ASKED AFTER HIS "FRIEND" PRESIDENT BUSH. EMBOFFS CANNOT RECALL HEARING BEN ALI SPEAK IN ENGLISH IN THE PAST. HE ALMOST ALWAYS SPEAKS IN ARABIC IN OFFICIAL EVENTS.
GODEC